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ABSTRACT

The America Reads Challenge, created in 1997, is a nationwide effort to expand the use of volunteers to help ensure that all children can read "well and independently by the end of third grade." State involvement in the America Reads Challenge has been primarily through the Federal Work Study (FWS) program for college students. The United States Department of Education will pay up to 100% of the FWS wages of eligible college students who serve as reading tutors to children in preschool and elementary school. Most states also have at least one community-based volunteer-tutoring program that operates under the guidelines of the America Reads Challenge. Unfortunately, relatively little reliable research has focused on determining what volunteer tutors can be expected to accomplish or on identifying the characteristics of effective programs. This report summarizes the findings from several research studies on volunteering conducted so far, specifically discussing the evaluations carried out by Barbara A. Wasik of Johns Hopkins University of 17 programs that used volunteer tutors to help students with reading problems. The report states that Wasik identified several key characteristics of successful volunteer-tutoring programs. It also notes that college students sometimes deviate from lesson plans developed in conjunction with their supervisors, and that this has positive and negative results. The paper concludes that, for many children, volunteer tutors can support the work of expert reading teachers, but tutors' limitations should be recognized clearly and their work should be designed and supervised carefully. (NKA)

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Focus *on Volunteer Reading Tutors*

SREB

David R. Denton

The use of community volunteers to help classroom teachers has been common in America's schools for many years. Increasing concerns about children who have problems learning to read have led to renewed attention to volunteer tutors as a potential resource. The America Reads Challenge, created in 1997, is a nationwide effort to expand the use of volunteers to help ensure that all children can read "well and independently by the end of third grade."

State involvement in the America Reads Challenge has been primarily through the Federal Work Study (FWS) program for college students. The U.S. Department of Education will pay up to 100 percent of the FWS wages of eligible college students who serve as reading tutors to children in preschool and elementary school. As of May 2000, more than 400 public and independent colleges and universities in the SREB region were participating in the program. Effective July 1, 2000, any college or university that receives FWS funds will be required to have an America Reads Challenge tutoring program.

Most states also have at least one community-based volunteer-tutoring program that operates under the guidelines of the America Reads Challenge. Most of these programs are funded through contributions and federal funds, some of which are administered by state agencies. Few states provide direct state funding for volunteer tutoring efforts. One exception is Arkansas, which designates $500,000 annually for nonprofit volunteer-tutoring efforts.

In addition to programs associated with the America Reads Challenge, there have been many attempts to develop model volunteer-tutoring programs that could be implemented in virtually any community or school. Unfortunately, relatively little reliable research has focused on determining what volunteer tutors can be expected to accomplish or on identifying the characteristics of effective programs.

The National Research Council's landmark 1998 report *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* contained the clearest statement to date about the potential benefits of volunteer tutoring programs in reading. The report makes the following observations:

> **Findings:** *Although volunteer tutors can provide very valuable practice and motivational support for children learning to read, the committee did not find evidence confirming that they are able to deal effectively with children who have serious reading problems. Effective tutoring programs require comprehensive screening procedures for selecting volunteers, training tutors, and supervising their ongoing work with children.*

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Conclusions: *Volunteer tutors are effective in reading to children, for giving children supervised practice in oral reading and for allowing opportunities for enriching conversation, but not usually in providing instruction per se, particularly for children having difficulties.*

Recommendation: *The role of well-trained and supervised volunteer tutors should be to expand children's opportunities for practicing reading and for motivational support, but not to provide primary or remedial instruction.*

The National Research Council's conclusions are consistent with the expanding knowledge base about what is involved in learning to read. Reading instruction requires teachers who can evaluate children's strengths and weaknesses and can design individualized reading programs to meet children's widely varying needs. (See the recent SREB report *Teaching All Children to Read.*)

New graduates of teacher education programs rarely are prepared fully to meet the reading needs of all children. Some educators even question whether an undergraduate teacher-education program is capable of producing graduates who are more than novices in teaching reading. If teaching reading is difficult for beginning teachers who have taken college courses to learn how to teach reading, it would seem unrealistic to expect volunteers — who have neither the time nor the training that full-time teachers have — to do any better.

Even so, there is substantial evidence that volunteer tutors can be very helpful to many children. In 1998, Barbara A. Wasik of Johns Hopkins University evaluated 17 programs that used volunteer tutors to help students with reading problems. While the projects' experiences suggested that volunteers can help many children improve their reading skills, only two programs had compared the achievement of children who received tutoring with the achievement of comparable students who received no tutoring.

Wasik also found that children experienced varying results after working with volunteer tutors. For some, reading levels improved significantly. Others demonstrated some progress but still did not reach the reading level of their peers, and some showed little or no benefit. This finding appears to reinforce the National Research Council's conclusion that volunteer tutors may not be effective in helping children who have serious reading problems.

Despite the relative lack of hard research evidence, Wasik identified several key characteristics of successful volunteer-tutoring programs:

- **Tutors should be supervised daily by a certified reading specialist** who assesses children's needs, develops lesson plans and makes sure that tutors have the materials they need.
- **Tutors need training** that provides them with a basic understanding of the reading process before they begin tutoring. While they are tutoring, they need ongoing training and feedback to build on this knowledge and respond to problems they encounter.
- **Tutoring sessions need to be structured and need to contain five basic elements:**

  1. rereading material with which the student already is familiar;
  2. analyzing words (to improve word recognition skills);

3. writing (to teach the relationship between reading and written language);

4. reading new material; and

5. modeling by tutors of effective reading techniques and strategies.

- **Tutoring should be intensive and consistent,** with children receiving at least one and a half hours per week with the same volunteer.

- **Volunteer tutors need sufficient high-quality materials to use in working with children.** Little books and easy-to-read stories need to be among these materials, as well as paper, markers and other items to use in exercises to develop specific skills.

- **Tutors should assess children's progress regularly and continually** so that, with the help of the expert coordinators, they can adjust activities to meet the children's changing needs. They should assess children's oral reading, concepts of print, word analysis and awareness of sound/letter relationships (phonemic awareness).

- **There needs to be a way to ensure that volunteer tutors attend sessions regularly** in order to maintain continuity and help gain the students' trust.

- **Tutoring should be coordinated with classroom instruction** to ensure that students do not receive conflicting messages about their reading behaviors.

A 1999 study looked at the practice of college students' serving as volunteer tutors as part of the America Reads Challenge. The study found that the tutors often deviated significantly from the lesson plans developed in conjunction with their expert supervisors. On one level, these deviations reflected the tutors' positive tendency to recognize and respond to children's individual characteristics. Unfortunately, the tutors' limited expertise also meant that they did not recognize that every activity included in each lesson was there for good reason. For example, they spent too little time studying individual words, apparently because they did not understand that problems with word recognition are a major stumbling block to the development of reading fluency.

In general, the college tutors relied on their intuitive understanding of reading and did not seek advice from their supervisors. They failed to take full advantage of the teaching materials provided because they did not always understand how the materials supported different parts of the lesson. They also failed to establish relationships with the students' classroom teachers, despite being urged to do so at the beginning of the tutoring effort. The report determined that the tutors' own experiences in learning to read gave them "a false sense of knowing what it was all about."

As with previous studies, this report concluded that the relationship between training and implementation is central to the success of volunteer tutoring. The report recommended that tutors' training continue throughout the school year, that they be provided with more specific information about the materials they receive, and that relationships between tutors and students' classroom teachers be established before the tutoring begins.

The bottom line is that, for many children, volunteer tutors can support the work of expert reading teachers, but tutors' limitations should be recognized clearly and their work should be designed and supervised carefully. Volunteer tutors can be especially helpful with children whose reading problems are less severe. Even in these cases, however, the volunteer effort's full potential will not be realized unless tutors' roles are defined and understood clearly and unless there are strong, supportive relationships between the tutors and their expert supervisors and between the tutors and students' classroom teachers.

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